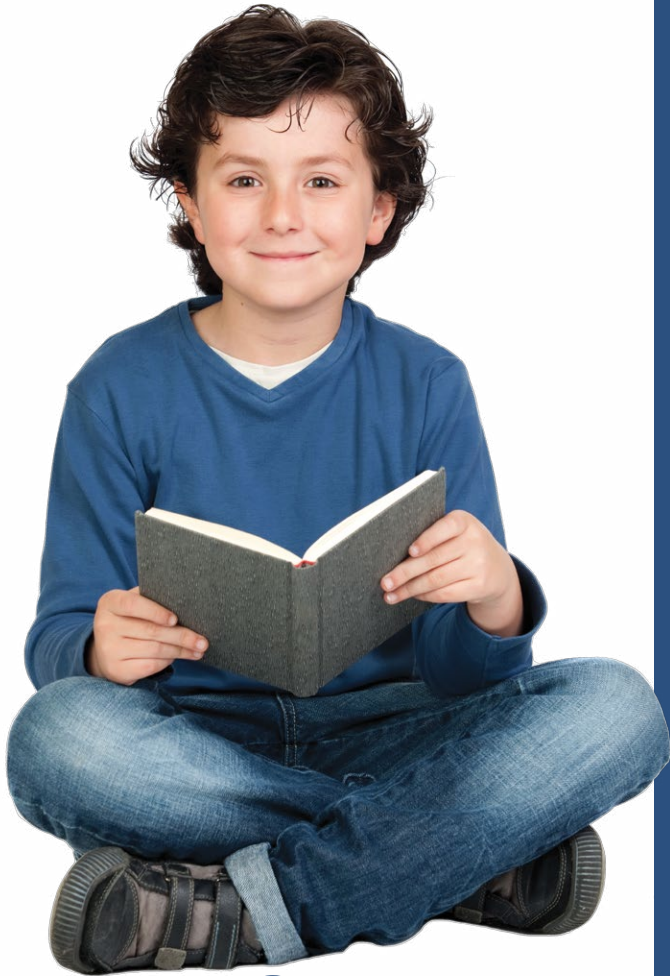


Simply Charlotte Mason presents



5 Steps to Successful Narration

by Sonya Shafer



Charlotte Mason outlined five steps to set your children up for success with narration. In this free e-book, you will learn how to present a successful narration lesson—one that results in real learning.

The steps are simple, yet effective.

1. Pick a good living book.
2. Look ahead and behind.
3. Read the passage.
4. Retell the passage.
5. Discuss ideas.

By providing your children with successful narration lessons, you will be equipping them to educate themselves for the rest of their lives!

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Contents

Five Steps to Successful Narration	7
The Power of a Good Story	11
Find Your Bearings.....	15
Time to Read.....	19
To Narrate and Discuss	21

Chapter 1

Five Steps to Successful Narration

My husband has been lifting weights for several months now in an effort to get into shape and improve his health. It's been good. The program he is using challenges him to regularly increase the number of pounds he lifts, and he was happily making progress and attaining new lift records until January rolled around. Then the wheels fell off the wagon.

All of a sudden he couldn't progress any farther. He couldn't lift anything heavier. What was wrong? After shooting some video and analyzing it, he discovered the problem: his form was off. He was not following the basic mechanics of how to lift correctly, and it was impeding his progress.

He had gotten to a certain level but he couldn't progress beyond that without correct form.

For those of us who use Charlotte Mason methods, it's good to examine our basic mechanics every once in a while too. I've talked to a lot of moms who are frustrated because they don't seem to be making any progress. They've reached a certain point and can't seem to get beyond it. When we discuss further, usually there is one component that they all mention. It's a basic component of Charlotte Mason that can either make or break your progress: narration.

If you are doing a narration lesson correctly, you will make great strides and your children will enjoy learning. If your form is off a bit, however, that deviation can hinder you from reaching your goals.

So let's go over the basics of narration—the correct form, if you will—that will help you continue to progress and experience success.

A Successful Narration Lesson

A successful narration lesson has five steps. Usually when a homeschool mom is frustrated with narration, it's because she is leaving out one of these steps.

1. *Pick a good living book.*

Some books are well nigh impossible to narrate, even for an experienced narrator. If you're using one of those, you won't make much progress. You want to make sure the book you're reading touches the emotions, fires the imagination, and paints a picture that you can see in your mind's eye as the author describes what is happening. This type of living book—one that gives ideas, not just dry facts—will pave the way for a smooth narration lesson.

2. *Look ahead and behind.*

This step is probably the one that is omitted most often. Yet it is an important part of the process and can make the difference between success and failure in a narration lesson. Take a few minutes to gain your bearings. Look at how today's reading connects to what happened last time and prepare your mind for what will be read about today.

3. *Read the passage.*

Once your mind is prepared, let the author share his great ideas. Your mind will gain great food for thought. Just make sure that you know when to stop "eating," rather than continuing to stuff your mind too full and not allow time to digest. In other words, keep a watchful eye on the length of the passage you read.

4. *Retell the passage.*

After the information comes into your mind, you must interact with it if you really want to know it. Considering what you read, pondering how it applies to other ideas you've gained, putting it into order, recalling details, mixing

it with your opinion, and then forming those thoughts into coherent sentences and telling them to someone else is when real learning takes place. Charlotte Mason called this The Act of Knowing.

5. *Discuss ideas.*

Any questions that are asked should be open-ended discussion questions that encourage more interaction with the author's great ideas. Questions such as these, and a lesson with all the components described above, will keep the focus on the joy of learning for personal growth. If you're encountering "Will this be on the test?" comments, that's a sure sign that something has shifted, your mechanics are off, and your progress is going to be hindered.

Let's take a little time to look at each step in more detail and get your narration lessons back into correct form.

Chapter 2

The Power of a Good Story

It's tempting to think that we can just open a book, start reading, ask one of the children to tell us what happened, and be done. But such a process leaves out a couple of key components that can make the difference between just going through the motions and real learning. And, after all, don't we want our efforts to result in real learning?

A narration lesson that results in real learning has five steps:

1. Pick a good living book.
2. Look ahead and behind.
3. Read the passage.
4. Retell the passage.
5. Discuss ideas.

Let's talk about Step 1: Pick a good living book.

The Power of a Good Story

I'm going to post two accounts here, both telling about the same event. Read both, then see what you think about the question that follows.

First, just the facts, ma'am.

Sources report that an unnamed male was assaulted near the main highway. Several items in his possession are now missing. A male of mixed nationality found him and brought him to a local hotel to recover and has offered to reimburse any expenses incurred, according to the hotel manager.

Now the story form.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back" (Luke 10:30–35, ESV).

So here's the first part of a two-part question: Which of the two accounts has the greatest potential to be remembered?

Most likely you will remember the story form best. The reason the story will stick in your head is because it touched your emotions and fired your imagination as you read. You were able to picture the action in your mind's eye—much more so than when you read just the facts—and that visual image will have lasting effects.

But there is something more. Yes, you will remember the story better and longer. Remembering is good; but remembering facts isn't going to educate in the true sense of the word. Only ideas can truly educate the whole person.

So here is the two-part question in full: Which of the two accounts has the greatest potential to not only be remembered but to shape you as a person?

Did you notice how the first account had been stripped of life lessons that educate us as people? There is a tiny glimmer in the easily-overlooked statement about reimbursement. But how many ideas are tucked into the second account? So many ideas that

would have been especially poignant to the original audience: the positions of those who came by and how they reacted; the social status of a Samaritan and how he was viewed; having compassion on someone who probably despises you; getting your hands dirty and being inconvenienced to give first aid; using your own possessions to help someone you don't know; the amount of money and what that was worth in those days!

Now we have something to discuss in addition to simply remembering! Now we have a powerful tool for educating the whole person.

So all of that is to say that the very first step in having a successful narration lesson is to pick the right kind of book. The right kind of book, a good living book, will

- touch the emotions,
- fire the imagination,
- create mental pictures with its wording,
- and convey living ideas, not just dry facts.

Pick a good living book and narration will come easily.

Chapter 3

Find Your Bearings

Probably the best way to illustrate Step 2 is to talk about the importance of framework. I saw an interesting video clip in which some instructions were read that were difficult to remember or to relate with. But once the person gave the viewer one little phrase . . .

Whoa. Stop right there. Take a moment to analyze what your mind is doing. How are you feeling about this chapter?

Chances are you're either puzzled and floundering a bit or disengaged and skimming at this point. Why? Because I didn't help you find your bearings at the beginning.

Let's start over. Clear your mind; here we go. Ahem, . . .

I hope you've been finding this little book on the 5 Steps to Successful Narration helpful. Remember that a good narration lesson has these five steps:

1. Pick a good living book.
2. Look ahead and behind.
3. Read the passage.
4. Retell the passage.
5. Discuss ideas.

In the last chapter we talked a bit about Step 1: Pick a good living book, and we used the story of the Good Samaritan as an example of what to look for. Do you recall anything about that story and the components it contained, which would make narrating easy?

Now let's talk a bit about Step 2: Look ahead and behind. This is a step that is often overlooked, but by now I hope you understand how important it is to help your reader or listener find her bearings as you get started.

Okay, stop again and analyze what you're thinking and feeling now. Do you feel a little more prepared to forge ahead? What made the difference? I guided you in looking behind and looking ahead. I helped you find your bearings—your position in relation to all the things you're dealing with.

When we jumped right into the details, with no hint of where we were in the discussion or where we were going, it was very difficult to focus and fully absorb what I was saying. But when we took just a minute to look behind and look ahead, your mind was better prepared to learn, because now it knew what to do with the input it was about to receive—where to file it, if you will.

Look Ahead and Behind

To help your reader or listener find her bearings, touch briefly on what was read last time from that book. Don't go into great detail, though; you want the student to do the mental exercise of pulling up that memory. Once that mental "rope" has been pulled out of the mental "well," it will be easy to tie the next portion of the book to it, thus constructing a continuous line of thought.

So encourage your student to remember the main points, or highlights, of last time's reading. Then give her a taste of what is coming in today's reading.

This step is also your opportunity to define any crucial words that you know will be needed for the student to understand. For example, I recently read a short story about *The Boy and the Filberts*. If I were going to read that story aloud to my children, I would want to tell them right up front that filberts are a type of hazelnut. Think about it. How can they picture the story in their mind's eye if they don't know what you're talking about?

Now, don't go overboard and give them a list of twenty vocabulary words from the chapter to look up and define before you read! Most words will be defined naturally in context. Don't

steal the joy of a well-written story, but do give your students any crucial point that is necessary for understanding. Help them find their bearings.

One more hint. You may want to pull two or three key words from the reading for the day and write them on a little white board or sheet of paper so the student can see them. Use those words to help the student look ahead. Tell her that she will hear those three words in the story and should use those three words in her narration. Then leave the list on display while you read and while she narrates. Those words will gently guide her in learning to listen for key names or concepts, plus they will form little mental hooks for her narration. (And as an added bonus, she will see how those words are spelled.)

Looking behind is easy. It doesn't take any preparation to flip open the book, glance at the previous chapter, and say, "Oh, yes, last time we read about the Good Samaritan. What do you recall about that story?" But to help our students have a successful narration, we need to invest some time in preparing—in looking ahead, ourselves.

It will probably take less time than you expect, but we need to get in the habit of looking ahead before the lesson begins. Take a few minutes to look over the reading for today and find any key words or crucial points that will help your student find her bearings. Determine how today's reading can be tied to last time's reading.

That little extra time—to scout around the uncharted territory of the new chapter and determine how to help our students find their bearings as they take the next step—is an important part in successful narration. Try it this week.

Chapter 4

Time to Read

So far we've discussed the importance of selecting a good living book. Book selection can make or break your child's success at narration. We've also emphasized looking ahead and behind before you begin reading in order to help your child find his bearings and prepare his mind to absorb what you are about to share.

Unfortunately, in many parents' minds a narration lesson has only two steps: read and narrate. The end. But to have a successful narration lesson—one in which your child's mind embraces and enjoys living ideas on which to grow—you need all five steps:

1. Pick a good living book.
2. Look ahead and behind.
3. Read the passage.
4. Retell the passage.
5. Discuss ideas.

Now let's look at Step 3. It's time to read.

Read the Passage

The beauty of the Charlotte Mason method of using living books is that it relieves us of the burden of being the fountainhead of all knowledge. We do not have to bear the responsibility of telling our children everything they need to know about any subject at hand. We can let the great minds of great men and women do that. (And I daresay they will do a better job of it than we could.) All we have to do is read their

ideas in the books we have selected. We can allow the book to be the teacher. It's a brilliant philosophy!

Our concern, then, is with the *How*: *how long* and *how often*. How long of a passage do we read? and How often do we read it?

How long we read depends somewhat on the student. If he is just starting out with this whole narration method, we read a short bit. If he is an old pro, we can read a longer portion. Aesop's fables are a great place to start with a beginner. They contain a whole story in just a paragraph or two. As the student gains experience and proficiency in listening and narrating, the length of the passage can be bumped out gradually until he is reading and narrating an entire chapter.

But don't get carried away. Even if a student can narrate a long passage, don't feel like you need to keep pushing the boundary. He will most likely benefit more from a moderate-length passage that he can ponder over than an epic-length passage that bombards him with too many ideas. When in doubt, too short is better than too long.

Now, for the second *How*—How often do we read the passage?—the answer is definite: once. We all have the very human tendency to not pay full attention if we know we can get another chance at hearing or reading the information. But such a tendency is the opposite of the habit of attention. And the habit of attention is the teacher's best friend. You will get a lot more accomplished, and have an enjoyable time doing it, if you cultivate the habit of full attention both within yourself and within your children. Reading the passage only once before requiring a careful narration can be a powerful motivator toward developing that habit!

This is another reason that we are careful not to read too long; the longer the passage, the harder it is to give it full attention. So be careful not to frustrate your students in their efforts to develop the habit of attention. Long passages, read once, are for those experienced and proficient in CM methods and habits. Shorter passages, read once, are your tool for getting there.

Chapter 5

To Narrate and Discuss

The time has come for your child to perform the Act of Knowing. We've discussed the first three steps to a successful narration lesson: pick a good living book, look ahead and behind, and read the passage. Those steps are foundational. Your narration lesson will be less than successful if you skimp on any of them.

But now it is time for the heart of the learning process: your child should retell the passage in his or her own words. Charlotte called this process the Act of Knowing, because you don't really know something until you actively ponder it and form mental connections with it and make it your own possession. In addition, telling someone what you now know cements it in your mind.

So narration provides a way to encourage the student to dig for his own knowledge, hold him accountable for doing so, plus secure that knowledge in his mind. It's quite the powerful method!

A few practical tips can make this retelling step flow smoothly. If you have several children together, let them take turns narrating portions of the passage. Make sure no one (not even you) interrupts the person who is narrating. If corrections or clarifications need to be made, wait until that person has finished his narration.

Older children who are experienced at narrating orally can write their narrations. Usually this gradual transition starts around fourth grade or so. Oral narration is a great way to practice organizing and communicating your thoughts. So make sure your children have plenty of practice doing that mental process before you add the extra challenge of putting it on paper.

Sometimes use a different approach to narration in order to keep things fresh. You might have the children draw their favorite scene or act out the story. Those who are writing their narrations could compose a diary entry from one character's point of view or

take the challenge to write the narration in poetry form. There are all kinds of possibilities!

Discuss Ideas

If the passage lends itself to a short discussion, invite comments by posing an open-ended question after the narrations are done. Did you catch that? *After* the narrations have been given. You want to first give the children an opportunity to share what they noticed. If someone mentions the point you were going to bring up for discussion, all the better!

Encourage the children to talk about their opinions, to explain whether they would have chosen to do the same thing the main character did, to speculate what might happen as a result, to draw character traits from the attitudes and actions they read about. Don't feel like you must give three points and a poem or preach a sermon after every reading. Simply take advantage of the living ideas that will come naturally in a good book and draw attention to them with tact and kindness.

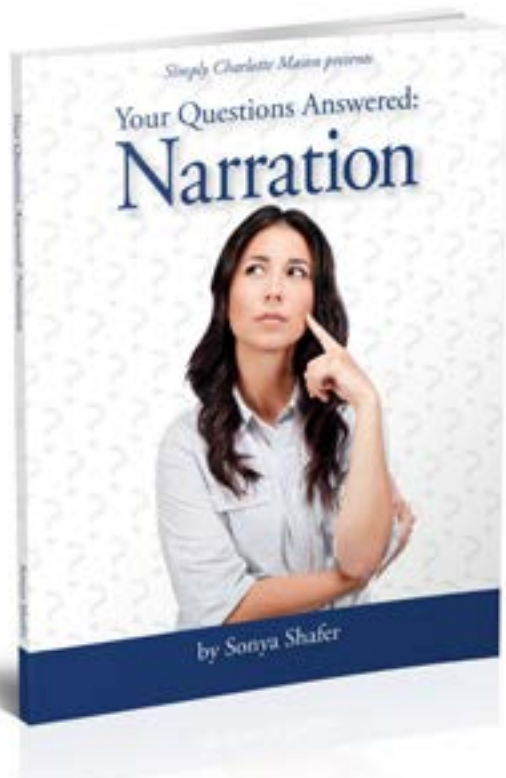
But watch yourself carefully. Yes, yourself. It will be all too easy to revert to the way you were probably taught by asking direct questions on the content. Don't do it. Asking direct questions on the content is the best way to squelch your child's natural curiosity for knowledge. The focus will quickly shift from learning for the joy of learning to Will this be on the test? Don't let that happen.

By providing your children with successful narration lessons, you will be equipping them to educate themselves for the rest of their lives. They will know how to perform the Act of Knowing and will be able to use that method for their own personal growth into adulthood.

Set your children up for success.

1. Pick a good living book.
2. Look ahead and behind.
3. Read the passage.
4. Retell the passage.
5. Discuss ideas.

If you have questions about narration, we have answers!



We've collected our best answers from years of blog posts, web pages, and conversations in one book—plus added new material—to give you a handy, practical reference.

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